
CALANG: THE INFLUENCE OF HUMANITARIAN AID

Saiful Mahdi

The earthquake and tsunami that struck Aceh on December 26, 2004 made Aceh well known. This is in great contrast with the time just before the catastrophe. Then, Aceh was sealed off, the result of the efforts by Jakarta as it continued its nearly thirty-year-long armed conflict against the region's insurrectionaries. From May 19, 2003, Aceh was closed off from the outside world under a state of "military emergency." Foreigners, including aid workers and journalists, were forbidden entry. Although the emergency measures were heavily criticized, the "state of emergency" was renewed on November 19, 2004 for six months. On May 19, 2004, it was "lowered" to become a "civil emergency," which was imposed for six more months. In Aceh, however, no difference at all could be perceived. Inhabitants' movements were still limited; force was still very often used. And foreigners were still forbidden to enter Aceh except at three isolated places: Sabang, Simeuleu, and Singkil.

A couple of days after the catastrophe, the worst of its sort in human history, Aceh seemed to have been forcibly opened to the international world. From a place lacking the presence of international media, Aceh became a place covered by media from all over the world. Suddenly Banda Aceh and the areas along the shore to the west and the east were filled by foreign nationals from various groups, of various colors, religions, races, and cultures. Banda Aceh became a true international city.

Calang, on Aceh's west coast, now forms part of the regency of Aceh Jaya, a new regency, the result of the blossoming of West Aceh, which was itself the result of the euphoria stirred up by the autonomy and decentralization Jakarta decreed in the 1990s. Calang was totally destroyed by the earthquake and tsunami. It was so completely destroyed that the local government moved the regency capital from Calang to Lamno, about fifty kilometers away in the direction of Banda Aceh. Practically no buildings were left in Calang; the entire infrastructure was leveled to the ground. (At the latest report, the transfer of the capital of Aceh Jaya from Calang to Lamno had been

postponed because the government and people from the area were afraid they would not get enough assistance if visitors representing aid organizations only saw Lamno, which received less than half the damage of Calang.)

At the very least, from the day the wave hit to the time when I was last there on January 28, everything in Calang, including humanitarian work, had to begin from zero. The roads to Calang from every direction are destroyed. One can get into Calang only by air or sea. Water, electricity, food, and all necessities have to be brought in or scavenged. Everyone sleeps in tents, including those government officials who were saved. There are approximately four thousand internally displaced persons (IDP) who live in tents or in huts they built themselves. Before the tsunami, Calang had about seven thousand residents. Calang at this point is no more than a big camp of people living in temporary quarters with temporary implements scraped together on the spot.

The marines, the elite troops of the Indonesian navy, claim that it was they who first opened Calang and the west coast, ending the region's isolation, after the tsunami. According to the inhabitants of Calang, they only got help four or five days after the tsunami struck. Some of them survived with whatever they found in the jungle and with the remains of food from family members living in the interior who were safe.

When I got to Calang via a helicopter owned by an international NGO, I saw right away that the marines were the "owners" of Calang and a large portion of the west coast. (At latest report, the marines' position has been taken over by Brimob [Mobile Brigade].) Everyone who arrives by helicopter or boat has to report to the marine commander. The marines have the most tents on the plain that contains the remains of Calang. At the time there were only two UN programs represented, along with nineteen international and two national NGOs, each with a staff of only two or three persons. The rest were marines and IDP in tents and huts they had constructed themselves. The IDPs live in the hilly region around Calang.

The marines put up tents for a school and a field-hospital. The marines readied a tent for orphans. The marines controlled the logistics and the heavy equipment that entered and left Calang. The marines run the game in Calang!

Actually, there is nothing wrong when humanitarian aid is provided by marines and the Indonesian armed forces, including the police and Brimob, the paramilitary police unit. The armed forces everywhere, indeed, are usually the backbone of the attempts at restoration after a catastrophe. In such a dire situation, following the enormous catastrophe that knocked out Aceh and other countries in South and Southeast Asia, any concerns about accepting assistance from the military should be minimal. But the social and political history of security in Aceh changes everything. Conflict and war still go on in Aceh. The civil emergency has not yet been lifted, and the ceasefire between the TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, Indonesian National Army) and GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, Free Aceh Movement) is only ad hoc and situational.

At the very least, it is the usual international practice that the sides who are involved in armed conflict must not take part in the work of humanitarian aid. The vested interests padding them, as they go about arms in hand, make it very easy for them to misuse that aid.

But, you say, there is no one else who could have reopened the area and brought effective aid to Calang except the marines. They prepared electricity, hospitals, sources of water, and even became teachers in emergency schools. Of course, with arms in hand everywhere and wherever they go and stay. I saw myself how these honorable marines taught in the emergency elementary-junior-senior-high school with M-16s strapped across their backs.

The situation is indeed difficult. Amateur humanitarian work certainly could not accomplish much in Calang. It took those who were trained and professional. Marines of course were well trained to control the coasts as well as areas located quite a distance inshore in this difficult situation.

Why are the marines stationed on the west coast? Of course, one factor is that Safzen Noerdin, currently the commandant of the Indonesian Naval Armed Forces Marines, is from Krüeng Sabée, eight kilometers south of Calang. Just at the right time the marines at Calang were commanded directly by a one-star general! Equipped even with amphibious landing vehicles and enormous-wheeled trucks and other heavy equipment. The marines at Calang are heroes.

Other factors concern prestige, influence, and image. Not just for the marines but for all the troops of the TNI and for the Indonesian government. The pictures that appeared repeatedly on TV showing US troops dropping food that was immediately grabbed up by desperate crowds on Aceh's west coast of course challenged the value, the capabilities, of the TNI and the Indonesian nation itself. After reports that US troops were the first to end the isolation of Aceh's west coast, it was as though the Indonesian marines wanted to make sure that their influence would be taken into account. And what could be more effective in consolidating their influence and repairing their image than evidence that they had helped solve logistical crises and prepared necessities?

For the people of Calang and other areas of the west coast, it did not matter who donated the aid, it seems. So long as what they needed was supplied, they took it willingly. But the source of aid nevertheless becomes an issue when members of an effective professional organization, such as the marines, are present in an area of armed conflict.

Almost all the inhabitants of Calang who became refugees stated that they were afraid to get too close to the marines. They received aid, but it all came via the marines. They accused marines of piling up aid supplies in warehouses and taking for themselves the choicest clothes, tools, and food—only then was the rest passed on to the people. There were also reports that at Panga, about eight kilometers south of Calang, supplies for the inhabitants were always rationed out by the marines because they were afraid that GAM guerrillas would benefit from the donations.

The IDPs from Calang also said that they were free to receive humanitarian aid only if foreign troops were present. I myself saw how refugees swarmed down from the hills to the Calang coast to get the aid they needed when the US Navy unloaded it from the USS McHenry in hovercrafts. They were busy choosing clothes, food, and drink, which they were free to take as they liked. Indeed, the US troops helped them open the big cartons and told them to help themselves to whatever they wanted. But as

soon as the foreign troops left, the IDPs immediately went back to their camps. They said, "The marines don't let us take things [supplies] ourselves."

For the people of the coast, the American troops are heroes. And the marines ... ? Well, they are heroes too, but viewed with a certain reserve. The heroes from America are respected; the heroes from their own country are feared, could we say?